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UNH Media Relations

Youth Online Exposed To More Porn But Fewer Sexual Solicitations, According To New Study

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DURHAM, N.H. -- A new national survey of online youth has both bad news and good news for those concerned about Internet safety. The bad news: increasing exposure to unwanted pornography and online harassment and cyber-bullying. The good news: less sexual solicitation.

These results are reported in a study conducted by University of New Hampshire researchers for the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC). The survey compared youth experiences in 1999-2000 with those in 2005.

The study found a pronounced increase in Internet users ages 10-17 who were exposed to unwanted pornography – fully one-third in 2005 compared to 25% previously. The study attributed this rise in part to aggressive tactics by pornography marketers, and the increased speed and capacity of computers and Internet connections to transmit images.

There was also an increase in online harassment, which rose to 9% compared to 6% in the earlier survey. Study authors said it was consistent with growing indicators of online incivility among youth.

At the same time, however, the study found online youth receiving fewer unwanted online sexual solicitations, only 1 in 7 in 2005 compared to 1 in 5 youth in 1999-2000. The report attributes this to more cautious behavior by young people, fewer of whom went to chat rooms or interacted online with people they did not know. The study authors think educational messages and media stories about the dangers of online encounters have had some benefit.

Unfortunately, the most serious kinds of sexual solicitations, those in which solicitors attempted to make offline contact with youth, did not decline. According to study authors, this suggests the most determined solicitors have not been deterred and that more targeted prevention efforts may be necessary to reach some youth.

Much of the unwanted pornography youth saw was very graphic. Most youth saw images of people engaged in sexual acts or sexual deviance or violence. "Internet providers and host sites need to do more to protect youth from unwanted pornography. They need better filtering and blocking and more and easier ways for youth to report problems," said Janis Wolak, one of the authors of the study.

The study also said more should be done to promote the reporting of offensive behavior and content. Unwanted sexual solicitations, pornography and harassment were rarely reported to Internet service providers or any authority. Youth and their parents were generally unaware of places they could make reports, such as the CyberTipline, which is maintained by NCMEC to receive online and telephone reports from citizens and Internet service providers.

Online Victimization of Youth: Five Years Later is available from the National Center on Missing and Exploited Children online at www.missingkids.com or 1-800-843-5678. The authors of the report are Janis Wolak, J.D., Kimberly Mitchell, Ph.D. and David Finkelhor, Ph.D.

of the Crimes against Children Research Center (CCRC) at the University of New Hampshire. The CCRC is devoted to providing statistics, research and policy analysis to the public and professionals concerned about victimized children. It has conducted a number of studies of youth Internet use and Internet sex crimes. Publications on these and other topics are available at the CCRC website at www.unh.edu/ccrc.

The report was based on surveys of two representative samples of youth and their caretakers, the first conducted between August 1999 and February 2002, the second between March and June 2005. The percentages reported have a margin of error of 2.5%.